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Benefits of Implementing Culturally Responsive Teaching In Latino Elementary Classrooms

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Teaching Strategies into Latino Elementary School Classrooms

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Abstract

The benefits of implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies into the elementary classroom empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge and skills. Culturally responsive educators see themselves as part of a community of learners and desire to learn collaboratively. This capstone investigates the relationship between culturally responsive teaching and its effect on predominantly Latino elementary school students' learning. Teachers who use culturally responsive teaching strategies see culture as an asset which can be used to enhance academic and social achievement. This study not only defines, but also highlights effective teaching strategies that reflect a culturally responsive pedagogy. The purpose of this senior capstone project is to discover the benefits of culturally responsive teaching in Latino elementary school classrooms through four teacher interviews, sixty student surveys, and two in class observations. My findings indicate that the implementation of culturally responsive teaching strategies is highly effective in the development of the *whole child*.

Introduction and Background

The brain of each child is cultivated in cultures that make it uniquely designed. Some minds may process two or three languages, be musically inclined, or desire to collaborate communally. Children often interpret the world through a cultural lens. Unfortunately, upon entering school students often feel the need to assimilate to the dominant culture by dismissing their cultural norms. Not only has assimilation tainted our public education system, but so has factors such as racial segregation and a widening achievement gap. These were not only problems of the past, but ones our nation struggles with currently. Although our growing population continues to grow more ethnically, culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse; integration in schools has been slow to follow.

Racial and ethnic inequality in education has a long-lasting history in the United States. Since 1954 (Brown v. Board of Education), when the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional, we have seen minimal progress made over the years in improving racial educational disparities. According to the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP, 2019), Latino students scored a 40.56% passing rate in reading and 28% in math, far underperforming their white peers which scored 65% passing rate in reading, and 54% math. Education equity is intended for all students, but indicators such as the achievement gap and school segregation state otherwise. Over the years, an unproductive solution-NCLB was put into effect, resulting in extra funding for Title-1 schools, school choice, and school academic report cards.. The goal being to try to reach the most disadvantaged and underfunded schools, yet our most populated Latino community of learners currently remains at the bottom of the achievement gap.

The role of teachers to acquire sufficient knowledge of culture and background is necessary in order to create a safe, secure, and supportive learning environment for their students. Inadequate preparation can create a cultural gap between teachers and students (Gay, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1995) which limits the ability of educators to choose curriculum to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students. According to the (PEW Research Center, 2021) America's public school teachers are less racially and ethnically diverse than their students-79% teachers are white across the nation. The majority of teachers in California as white (61%) not reflecting the Hispanic student population of 55% (Ed Data, 2021).   According to the California Department of Public Education (2022), the Latino students currently make up the majority population in California's public schools. Therefore, due to their great number and presence, their level of academic achievement should be a concern to our educational leaders and policy makers.

Understanding the urgency to academically prepare the Latino students has led me to research the benefits of implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies in Latino elementary classrooms. I want to know how it can encourage Latino students to become independent, self-directed learners- who are prepared for higher order cognitive thinking. Latino students are stereotypically viewed as having a deficient work ethic, resulting in being assigned less rigorous coursework, which inhibits engagement and student achievement (Lopez, 2018). By lowering expectations and fostering a dependent learner; we are doing an injustice for the Latino student. A dependent learner struggles to do complex, school oriented tasks like synthesizing and analyzing informational text without constant support (Wagner, 2008).

In a racialized society, inequities are logical and predictable, but at the same time discussions of race and racism continue to be muted and marginalized (Billings & Tate, 1995).

When working with diverse learners, it is necessary for teachers to have adequate training about culture and how it constructs identity. Teachers need to be aware of the impact of larger social, political, and economic conditions that can create inequitable educational outcomes. Educators must find it necessary to challenge implicit biases that form throughout one's lifetime.

This senior capstone will benefit me as an educator by finding resources on how to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into my future classroom. Upon completing my research, and identifying the benefits of incorporating culturally responsive teaching into elementary classrooms, I will purposefully aim to implement its teaching strategies into my curriculum. As a future educator, implementing culturally responsive teaching within my curriculum will not only contribute equity to the students, but also provide me the ability to measure learning outcomes and results. Asset-based pedagogies view the diversity that students bring to the classroom, including culture, language, disability, socio-economic status, immigration status, and sexuality as characteristics that add value and strength to classrooms and communities, (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022). "When such assets are not yet part of a student's repertoire, educators must directly provide for their acquisition and uses" (Boykins & Nogura, 2011, p.114)." In my research, I will address how educators can use the science of learning and development to ignite high levels of teaching and learning, which in return will provide their students an opportunity to manage and take responsibility for their own learning success.

Both state and national governing bodies are at a loss, as they struggle to find answers to end public school segregation and close the achievement gap in our educational system. Several solutions have been in effect, such as increased funding, bussing, increasing testing and school accountability, but to no avail, school segregation and an achievement gap still exist. As a future

educator and proponent for equity in education, my primary research question is: How can teachers implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into their elementary classrooms?" My related secondary research questions include:

1) *What is culturally responsive teaching and define its strategies ?*

2) *How to implement culturally responsive teaching into a Latino elementary classroom?*

3) *How does culturally responsive teaching affect elementary Latino students academically, socially, and culturally?*

4) *What are indicators of a culturally responsive educator?*

5) *What resources are available for future teachers?*

In order to answer the above research questions, I began by delving into an extensive literature review of scholarly journal articles and books written by educational scholars.

Literature Review

American public schools remain largely separate and unequal-with profound consequences for students of color-Black and Latino. School segregation leads to substantial disparities in school funding and a widening achievement gap along racial lines. Unfortunately, the conditions of many schools today continue to separate and further root marginalized groups to positions of disadvantage. Currently, the Latino population makes up more than 50% of California K-12 students, resulting in a large part of our population being affected by educational disparities (California Department of Education, 2022). Educational leaders search for ways to close the achievement gap and manage equitable school funding leading to a quality education for all. To ensure all students have access to schools where they can grow and thrive, educators must know how to disrupt the status quo and provide creative solutions to inequities. So far proposed solutions such as funding, bussing, and more testing have not been successful at

closing the achievement gap, therefore implementing new teaching strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners may be the solution. Throughout the years, educational theorists have researched and studied the impact of using a student's cultural frames of reference to teach curriculum and content, which has led to the formulation of culturally responsive teaching.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Over the years, several educational scholars have synthesized their observational studies to define culturally responsive teaching and the benefits of implementing its strategies into the classroom. Teachers who commit to the vision of academic improvement, cultural awareness, and community building will make a significant difference in the life of a child (Ladson-Billings, 2005). Throughout my research, I chose to examine the studies of six key educational scholars and teacher educators, who have impacted this area of study, Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), Frances Lopez (2018), Geneva Gay (2011), Zaretta Hammond (2015), Michael Toth (2011) and Tony Wagner (2008). One commonality between these educational scholars is their focus on four main re-occurring aspects of culturally responsive teaching: the benefits of cultivating higher order thinking, asset-based pedagogies, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness.

Culturally responsive teaching was first developed by Gloria-Ladson Billings (1995) in the 1990's. Her desire was to change the stereotype about children of color and their misbehavior and academic failure. Ladson-Billings (1995) spent two years observing teachers who successfully held high learning expectations for their students, and also chose to integrate elements of students' communities. It was from these observations that the components of culturally responsive teaching originated. Ladson-Billings (1995) noted seven culturally responsive teaching strategies from her observations that would enhance and support classroom instruction. She noted that cultural differences among students should be celebrated, students

need to feel welcomed in the classroom, a classroom should be set up in a way that is physically and culturally inviting, teachers must set and hold high expectations for all students, make accommodations for different modes, speeds, and styles of learning, exercise strong classroom management strategies, and encourage collaboration and teamwork.

Over the years of observational studies culturally responsive teaching was theorized by Geneva Gay as when teachers use student's cultural frames of reference to teach curriculum and content (Gay, 2011). As a result, the academic achievement of ethnically diverse students will improve when they are taught through their own cultural and experiential filters. It ensures students engage in academically rigorous curriculum and learning, feel affirmed in their identities and experiences, and develop a critical socio-political consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

In her book titled, *Asset Pedagogies In Latino Youth Identity and Achievement*, Lopez (2018) expresses that teachers who are not prepared to instruct Latino children in culturally appropriate ways are doing a disservice to Latino students. Educators of Latino students need to learn to reject emerging bilingualism as a deficit or hindrance to students' learning, but rather a culture asset. Bilingualism is a linguistic asset in our advancing global world.

The essential point about culturally responsive teaching is about helping the student grow his or her brain power as a learner who is competent and confident (Hammond, 2015). Academic achievement, being the first pillar, acknowledges that the primary function of a teacher's role is to cultivate the minds of their students (Ladson-Billings,1995). Hammond (2015) explains, "We want them to have the ability to size up a task, map out a strategy for completing it and then execute a plan" (p.122). Culturally relevant teachers hold high academic expectations. They make it a goal to know the content taught, the learner, and how to teach the content to the learner. "It's about pushing back on *inequity by design*, that's caused by under-developing students of color's cognitive abilities through low-level instruction"(Hammond, 2015, p.30).

The ultimate goal of culturally responsive teachers is helping dependent learners learn how to learn; to become independent learners (Wagner, 2008). Wagner demonstrates the vast majority of low-skilled jobs that used to support previous generations have disappeared by technology. Wagner's theory supports the central idea that social justice requires that we prepare ALL students to find success in employment and be productive citizens (Wagner, 2008). Wagner (2008) identifies three factors that have made the U.S. methodology of teaching obsolete for 21st century learners and citizens in a global economy: the rapid evolution of new global ways in which work is evolving, the sudden and dramatic shift from a world of limited information to a world of information flux, and the impact of media and technology on how young people learn, relate to the world, and to each other.

Noted by Toth and Sousa (2019) in ***Power of Student Teams***, culturally responsiveness is a research-based instruction placing students in a joint role with their teachers. Students can take responsibility for their own learning success daily in the classroom. After two decades of research studies based on neuroscience and psychology, results have shown students can be engaged in an ongoing self-assessment process allowing them to observe their growth. This would be achieved through an instructional model that includes learning targets, group interaction, self-monitoring, feedback, and the emotional aspects of student success. Toth and Sousa (2019) describe their approach to establishing student teams within the classroom as the foundation to promoting student collaboration, engagement in academic discourse, and developing critical social-emotional skills. Student Teams base its learning on the Educational Neuroscience Model, which emerged at the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, and pedagogy.

Implementation of Culturally Responsive Teaching

Currently, there is a plethora of theoretical studies on culturally responsive teaching, but a lack of its implementation. "A culturally responsive pedagogy builds on the premise of how people are expected to go about learning many differences across cultures" (Villegas,1991,p.13). When the tools and strategies of culturally responsive teaching are blended together it creates social, emotional, and cognitive conditions that allow students to actively engage and take ownership of their learning process (Hammond, 2015). Cultural competence requires that teachers understand culture and its role in education, and they challenge their own culture, biases, and privileges to strengthen their instructional practice (Billings and Tate, 1995).

Lopez (2018) explains, "teachers' cultural knowledge behaviors, which are believed to be important because they validate students' cultural prior knowledge, are strongly associated with an increase in students' self concept in reading and mathematics" (p.101). When cultural competence is exhibited in the classroom, the classroom can be described as full of *mirrors* and *windows*-students see themselves reflected in the classroom-*mirrors* and have opportunities to learn and see into the lived experiences of others- *windows* (Ladson-Billings, 1995). As students connect to activities and concepts on a personal level it naturally results in the motivation to learn (Gay, 2011). Gay (2011) based her framework on three dimensions: institutional, personal, and instructional. Instructional referring to administration, policies and values. Personal dealing with cognitive and emotional processes that teachers engage in to become culturally responsive. Instructional involving materials, strategies, and activities which form the basis for instruction. Gay (2011) believes in making the instruction personally relevant, using a variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.

To be successful in teaching all students equitably, Ladson-Billings (2009) addresses the importance of believing knowledge must be viewed critically, being passionate about knowledge and learning, scaffolding, or building bridges to facilitate learning, and ensuring that assessment is multifaceted and demonstrates various forms of excellence. Educators have noted the science of the brain can be challenging, but it is important to know how to apply the science of learning and development within the socio-political conditions of our current educational system (Pang, 2005). Hammond (2015) found that within the science of learning and development: *all* children are wired for expansive learning, high intellectual performance, and self-directed learning. Unfortunately, research has shown that low-income students and those of color often have academically low expectations already set for them (Lopez, 2017). Curriculum should challenge students to develop higher order knowledge and skills to be able to succeed in their education (Villegas, 1991). Effective communication, curiosity, and critical thinking skills are much more than just the desirable outcomes of a liberal arts education, but are essential competencies for life in the 21st century (Wagner, 2008). Liljedahl (2021) states, "Rather, the goal is to get more of your students thinking, and thinking for longer periods of time, within the context of curriculum, which leads to longer and deeper learning" (p. 4). A culturally responsive educator does not define a student by their academic "success" alone but rather nurtures a combination of factors in the learning environment. The goal is to teach culturally responsiveness by providing high academic learning opportunities, cultural competence-students affirmed identity, and critical consciousness of the world around them (Lopez, 2017).

A common misconception with culturally responsive teaching is that successful teaching is primarily focused on "what to do" rather than "how we think"- about our students, their communities, our curriculum, and our role as educators. Ultimately, what we believe about our students will drive our actions and responses to them. Culturally responsiveness is not something

we add onto our teaching, but the foundation of instructional practice; the lens in which we approach our work. It is teaching that is responsive to a distinct group of students-who they are as people and learners, and their communities (Ladson-Billings, 2005). In addition, Villegas (1991) asserted that, "In order to maximize learning experiences, teachers need to gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into educational practice" (p.13).

Indicators of Culturally Responsive Teaching

If one was to observe traditional forms of instruction compared to culturally responsive teaching one would notice a stark difference. In traditional methods of teaching the teacher is the one who controls the learning environment, and the majority of learning is through rote learning and recitation. Learning is mainly assessed through oral and written assessments in traditional learning, while little opportunity is available for critical thinking, decision making, or problem solving skills to be utilized. Traditional teaching often fosters passive learning rather than active participants, which results in decrease in student engagement and discourse. The goal of culturally responsive teaching is to help dependent learners become independent learners, (Hammond, 2015). Hammond (2015) indicated that, "We want them to have the ability to size up a task, map out a strategy, and then execute a plan" (p.122). Liljedahl (2021) states that, "Rather, the goal is to get more of your students thinking, and thinking for longer periods of time, within the context of curriculum, which leads to longer and deeper learning" (p. 4).

According to Toth and Sousa (2019), the indicators of a culturally responsive classroom are when classrooms are transformed to team centered learning. Every student in the classroom is speaking and listening to team members, using academic vocabulary, and developing critical social-emotional skills. Toth and Sousa (2019) explain that direct instruction driven classrooms fail to build the complex communication skills that all students, especially ELL learners need to

practice. In team-centered classrooms, direct instruction is limited to briefly establishing base knowledge, then students take the lead on learning within their teams for much of class time. In a team-based model, teams are not formed for a one-time group project, but rather two-five students working together every day to accomplish their learning goals.

Another indicator of a culturally responsive educator is when their goal is to unleash higher learning potentials of ethnically diverse students. "Culturally responsive teaching is about helping culturally and linguistically diverse students who have been marginalized in schools build their skill and capacity to do rigorous work. The focus is not on motivation but on improving their brainpower and information processing skills,"(p.16) notes Hammond (2015). Liljedahl (2021) states, "Rather, the goal is to get more of your students thinking, and thinking for longer periods of time, within the context of curriculum, which leads to longer and deeper learning" (p. 4). "Culturally responsive teaching is not just about motivating disengaged students, it's about rebuilding trust with them through a learning partnership, using that rapport and trust to get permission from students to push them into their zone of proximal development. When students are in this zone of proximal development, the brain responds by growing more neurons, therefore be able to do more rigorous work and deepening understanding" (Hammond, 2015, p.13) Indicative of a teacher who desiring to teaching intentional and relevant to the student will ground their lesson in issues that are meaningful to students' daily life as a vehicle for teaching content (Lopez, 2017). Students are prepared to think and act in ways that challenge the inequities in their local communities and larger society as a whole.

Academic, Social, and Cultural Effects on Students

Drawing insight from schools already using this model of instruction and visual images has provided evidence to educators of what student-focused learning looks like. Studies have

shown that students who are exposed to social-emotional learning programs are an average 13

percent points higher than their non-SEL peers (Durlak et.al, 2011). The researchers also found

that behavioral problems, emotional distress, and drug use were all lower for SEL students, while

their attitudes toward oneself, others, and their school was higher (Durlak et. al, 2011). Culturally

responsive approaches support opportunities to learn for all students by supporting

communication between teachers and students (Gay, 2000; Hammond, 2016).

According to the *Applied Developmental Science Journal*, schools that are culturally

responsive and competent help build conditions for learning and support development while

reducing cognitive load and minimizing the tensions and the demands on the brain created by

culturally challenging schools. Gay (2010) indicated that, "We are partners in the quest for

learning, and the better we can combine our resources, the better all of us will be. I will teach

better and you will learn better"(p.234). Culturally challenging schools require additional

attention for some students, who expend mental and emotional energy on hostile environments,

resulting in a loss of cognitive and emotional energy for learning and socialization (Boykin,

2000; Spencer 2017).

Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed three main components of Culturally Relevant

Pedagogy: a) *academically*-focus on student learning and success and ability to reason and

problem solve, b) *culturally*-developing students' cultural competence to assist students in

developing positive ethnic and social identities, and c)*critical consciousness or sociopolitical*-

supporting students' ability to recognize societal inequalities. Ladson-Billings (2009) states, "I

defined culturally relevant pedagogy as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually,

socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and

attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p.17)." Ladson-Billings (2009) compared these three

components to three sides of an equilateral triangle, equally important and equally necessary. Author of the book *Creating the Opportunity to Learn,* Boykin & Noguera (2011), describes equity as not just equal access, but it also entails outcomes and results. When student's cultural backgrounds no longer predict their outcomes, it is then that equity is at work.

Over the past few decades, students' experiences and backgrounds have drastically changed. Classrooms now reflect families of varying races, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses. As a result, teachers must stop and reflect on new ways they will teach their students. Educators have the unique power to impact the lives of their students by including students' cultural references in all aspects of learning. As we compare culturally responsive teaching to traditional teaching one can note the stark differences that exist. In a culturally responsive classroom, both teacher and student actively contribute to the learning environment. A culturally responsive teacher promotes more interactive, collaborative, and culturally conscious learning activities, fosters a sense of belonging for students of all backgrounds, and facilitates brain processing and student engagement. As for traditional teaching, the teacher controls the learning environment, and the students are passive learners. The teacher relies mainly on lectures, memorization, and oral and written assignments, along with regimented and routine with little day-to-day change, and often results in lower student engagement levels and increased feelings of boredom.

Theory

The main theoretical framework of culturally responsive teaching is to attain an academic culture in the classroom in which there are high expectations for all students to achieve a challenging core curriculum. This is achieved through academic thinking where students have discussions face-to-face, practice social skills daily, and they rely on one another as they encounter rigorous standards-based tasks (Liljedahl, 2021) . Teams are interdependent, relying

on each other for *minimal* teacher guidance. It is the team members that are accountable for each other's learning and team culture. The teams share a common vision and values supported by a collaborative culture which fosters trust and empowerment. Overall, the team's learning is founded on collective strengths (Toth & Sousa, 2019).

Another theory presented is that of differentiated instruction. This theory is based on the belief that teachers should adapt instruction to various learning styles. After researching Mel Levine's (2002) *A Mind at a Time,* one must realize before one can build a mind they first must understand how it works. For example, teachers should be adequately trained to teach in a variety of learning styles and become knowledgeable of neurodevelopment functions required for success in differences of learning. The sociocultural theory mentioned in Laura Berk's (2001) *Awakening Children's Minds*. Berk's book on *Awakening Children's Minds* is based on a community-of-learners model which assumes that each person in a classroom has a different area of expertise that can help other community members, depending on the task presented. In this model, both adults and children are regarded as learners working together in their respective roles. Learning styles, learning modalities, and strengths, may be classified as sensory, perceptual, cognitive, personality type, or personal talents. For example, visual, auditory, and kinesthetic would be classified under sensory, differences between left and right hemisphere under perceptual, Kolb's Learning Style (perception vs. processing) under cognitive processing, Myer Briggs Type Indicator under personality, and Multiple Intelligences under personal talents (Kolb,1984).

Critical awareness on the teachers' part reflects essential knowledge that mitigates bias and prejudice toward students (Lopez, 2018). Contemporary research is showing that the achievement gap is only symptomatic of a deeper problem having to do with how Latino

students are instructed in the classroom. Bridging the school culture with the culture that students bring to school can have a powerful effect on teaching and learning. Although the benefits of implementing culturally responsive teaching are many, the power to do so lies within the teachers' willingness to challenge their own implicit biases and not perceive differences as deficient. The unintentional and unconscious attitudes impact how teachers relate to their students, choose curriculum, assess learning, and plan their lessons. Educators need consider how students envision their ethnic identity and how they receive and interpret disapproving and racial messages from peers and teachers, so they can be prepared to show support and value to each student (Lopez, 2017).

After extensively reviewing literature and journal articles, the information I collected allowed for the forming of my methodology and procedures aspect of my research. The current academic literature on culturally responsive teaching appears to be very hopeful as compared to our current educational system. The positive characteristics and benefits of culturally responsiveness made it helpful when I needed to establish a method to collect data. The only opposing views I came across throughout my research are basically within the educator themselves, whether or not they are willing to challenge their biases and commit to culturally responsive teaching. Also, teachers with a strong religious mindset may feel uncomfortable discussing topics in class that do not match up with their convictions or beliefs. Overall, the consensus of material on culturally responsive teaching has been positive and encouraged by many educational scholars.

Methods and Procedures

The school site I chose to conduct my research has a population of 89 percent Latino students, 40 ELLs, and is a Title 1 school. The test scores (SARC) for this school site reflect one

of the highest in their local school district 72% Math and 87% Reading. I selected this population because it has a high concentration of low socio-economic Latino students, and I knew they have the freedom to create curriculum relevant to their student body as long as it meets state standards. I was curious to know what type of teaching strategies they are using in contrast to the other struggling public schools in the surrounding area. I noticed the school is rather racially segregated mainly because it exists in a highly concentrated Latino community, yet their scores are reflecting a positive impact on the achievement gap. My prediction as to why this particular school was succeeding in closing the gap, was that it reflected new teaching strategies.

To seek the answers to my primary and secondary research questions I chose to interview four elementary school teachers; two sixth grade teachers and two second grade teachers by email (See Appendix 1). To deepen my understanding of how culturally responsive teaching benefits low-income Latino elementary students, an anonymous survey and interview questions (See Appendies 2 & 3) were submitted to two sixth grade classes consisting of sixty students. I chose to have the teachers administer the survey and interview questions at a time that was not intrusive to their learning schedule. I researched two books by educators who have done extensive research studies of the effects on the elementary students' brain from culturally relevant teaching, and two books by authors specifically targeting the Latino community achievement gap. I reviewed and analyzed journal articles and peer-reviewed studies to ensure its validity and correspondence to my topic of research. I obtained scholarly articles from library databases, books from the local bookstore, interview questions submitted through email, and an anonymous student survey and interview questions administered in person. I conducted a brief in person observation of a second and a sixth grade class on October 28, 2022. The in class observations allowed me to collect data on any indicators of culturally responsive teaching, and

note some of its benefits and challenges upon implementation. I observed sixty second grade students rotate through three different centers with 10 students in each. Each center has a different learning objective: 1.) entails working individually on a computer based Lexia Reading or ST Math program; 2.) review concepts learned with a teacher; 3.) learn new material with a teacher. In sixth grade, I observed students collaborating in "squads" grouped in 3's. The students were positioned at small tables which made it easier to share information and technology with one another. The sixth-grade students rotate throughout the day between two classes and two teachers, one ELA and one STEM teacher.

My research began on September 4th, 2022 when I contacted two sixth grade teachers via email, and they responded promptly with helpful information. They provided me with the title of three books supporting team strategies and solutions to the global achievement gap. Four teachers agreed to be interviewed by me via email, and to assist me by administering an anonymous student survey and questionnaire which I created. Analysis of interviews, classroom observations, and surveys helped me examine if culturally responsive teaching is being implemented, and if so, how it is supporting the Latino learners at this particular site of research. As I work on this study, I value the teacher and administrator's knowledge and student reflections, as they work to co-construct new ways of doing and thinking with me.

In the beginning of the semester, I had a few ideas of a capstone in mind, but it was not until August 26, 2022, when I met with Dr. Thao for an intensive counseling session. Dr. Thao helped me narrow my topic down to a specific area of research, which enabled me to formulate my primary and secondary research questions as a framework for my research. After our meeting, I had a strategic plan on how to conduct my investigation and research. I believe this research will not only benefit me as a future teacher, but current teachers, principals, educational

coaches, and students. I have provided reasons why this strategy is effective in benefiting a Latino elementary school student to grow, not only academically, but socially and politically as well. Once I complete my Capstone project, I will provide resources available to use if one chooses to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into their classroom curriculum. After completing a thorough amount of research, data collection, observations and synthesizing my results, I feel I have obtained enough knowledge to answer my research questions.

Participants

The teachers who were surveyed were selected from a local K-8 Elementary School in San Benito County. I sent an email to each of the teachers requesting their participation in the study, and confirmed it would be conducted anonymously. Thankfully, they all decided to take time out of their busy schedules to co-constructors of knowledge with me.

The participants are as follows:

- Teacher 1 is a Latino male elementary school teacher who has been teaching for ten years. He has taught various elementary grades, but is currently teaching second grade.

- Teacher 2 is a male teacher of Moroccan descent and has been teaching for nine years. He is currently teaching second grade.

- Teacher 3 is a female Latina/Caucasian teacher who has been teaching for five years and is currently teaching sixth grade.

- Teach 4 is a female teacher and is Hmong American and has been teaching for three years. She is currently teaching sixth grade.

The teachers interview questionnaire (See Appendix 1) was created as a Google document and emailed out to each teacher individually. I was able to complete my survey early in the research process, which allowed plenty of time for the teachers to complete it. The

students' anonymous survey and questionnaire (See Appendix 2 & Appendix 3) were created on a Google document as well, the teachers printed them out and provided a copy for each student to fill out anonymously. Once I collected the surveys and questionnaires from the students, I needed to synthesize all my findings from 60 participants which took a few hours. I chose this method of research because it was the best way to collect data from busy educators allowing them to fill out the interviews at a convenient time. Between teacher interviews, in class observations, student surveys & questionnaires, and extensive literature review, my research approach has proven effective and provided me with adequate data to record on the results, findings, and discussion area of my project.

Results, Findings and Discussion

Through my research, literature review, and application of my methods and procedures I have acquired a sufficient amount of data indicating culturally responsive teaching strategies beneficial on a Latino elementary school student's learning experience.

What is culturally responsive teaching and define its strategies? After conducting four teacher interviews, I was able to form a clear perspective on how current educators define culturally responsive strategies. "One who practices culturally responsive teaching is knowledgeable about many cultures including their own, are caring and empathetic, and they regularly reflect about their own beliefs of other people's culture"(Teacher 1, personal communication, November 5, 2022) (See Appendix1). I found his last statement very important because implicit biases are the underlying factors that prevent teachers from committing to teach culturally and inclusively. "Moreover, culturally responsive teaching involves using student's customs, experiences, characteristics, and perspectives as tools to guide" (Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18 , 2022) (See Appendix 1). "Off the top of my head, I am unfamiliar

with the strategies associated with culturally responsive teaching" (Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18, 2022)(See Appendix 1). Teacher 2 was not familiar with the name "culturally responsive teaching," but as I continued to interview him, I noticed he was actually implementing some of the strategies into his teaching. Teacher 3 states, "I see culturally responsive teaching as understanding the backgrounds and cultures of all my students, and acknowledging their experiences and perspectives" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022)(See Appendix 1).

Teacher 4 said, "Culturally responsive teaching and strategies allow students to bring their identity into the classroom"(Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). She expanded her thoughts by sharing, "This includes heritage, orientations, and developmental stages, and being that I work with pre-teens, I use alot of age references and language that is geared toward them" (Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Overall, three out of the four teachers believed that a culturally responsive teaching approach is beneficial for their Latino elementary school students. Culturally responsive teaching strategies is not a one time event used to celebrate a holiday, but rather it is a mindset committed to teaching students with a cultural asset perspective. Culturally responsive teaching is an extension of multicultural education (Gay, 2011) which involves recognizing the importance of culture, language, or identities in school settings. I have observed that Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 both view ELL as an asset to their group of learners. I found it interesting that even though Teacher 2 is not fluent in Spanish, he is willing to use whatever bilingual skills he has to communicate with his students. Teacher 2 states, "I do embrace my students native languages. I am a native English speaker with very limited Spanish speaking skills so I will

answer my ELL students in Spanish or use Spanish in my instruction when I am able to"
(Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18, 2022)(See Appendix 1).

In a traditional classroom, the teacher gives direct instruction, and students listen to and complete their work individually. The teacher is in charge of students' learning. On the contrary, a strategy called *academic teams* is what two of the four teachers currently use. Teacher 3 explained, "By using *academic teams* it gives me the opportunity to implement culturally responsive teaching strategies" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022)(See Appendix 1). From my interviews I gathered students work in groups of three called-*squads* in which squad leaders and team leaders direct instruction (active learning), while under their teachers supervision (facilitator). Students have opportunities to both teach and be taught through peer led discussions. They usually have to work together to complete lessons and assignments. Squad teaching strategy falls under the characteristics of culturally responsiveness by allowing students to be partners in their education.

2) How to implement culturally responsive teaching into a Latino elementary classroom?
It is necessary for teachers to acknowledge the asset of different ethnic groups in order to incorporate diverse teaching strategies, which in return will help cultivate bridges between home and school experiences (Gay, 2011). Before a teacher can successfully implement culturally responsive teaching strategies, one must challenge any cultural biases that can affect the expectations and opportunities of children in their classrooms. Due to the fact that our own interpretive lens is based on our own cultural assumptions, it takes a conscious effort on the teacher's part to understand and learn across cultures. For instance, it has been documented that students are positively affected by multicultural literature in which they can see themselves but also gain understanding of others. A culturally competent classroom allows for "mirrors &

windows"-students see themselves reflected in the classroom "mirrors" & opportunities to learn and see into the lived experiences of others "windows" (Gay, 2011).

Not only must teachers reflect on their own cultural backgrounds and cultural identities and how it impacts their interactions with their students, they must take a critical lens on policies and practices that may have a direct impact on their learning community (Lopez, 2018). I think as a future educator, it is important for one's students to know it is safe to share their critical lens on policies and be able to discuss those within their learning environment. Historically, like in Brown vs Board of Education Case [1](1954), social change often begins within the schools. As a current sixth grade teacher, Teacher 4 shared, "I allow children to be who they are as long as they are respectful to others. I have learned students' handshakes. I also listen to audiobooks that the students are reading"(Teacher 4, Personal Communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Teacher 3, responded, "I try to provide literature where my students can see themselves and engage in discussion, mainly I help students relate lesson content to their own backgrounds (Teacher 3, Personal Communication, October 16, 2022) (See Appendix 1). All four of these teachers are engaging in asset-based practices with their students by showing the characteristics the students bring to the learning community as adding value and strength. By teacher and student engaging in asset-based practices, it can be used to eliminate disparities (Lopez, 2018).

In the second grade classroom with 50% ELL students both teachers made it a goal to provide every student with multiple entry points into a lesson and different options to represent their way of thinking. Teacher 2 explained, "I also use flexible groupings so students who may feel lost or hesitant to share will have a chance to collaborate with their peers in a smaller setting before sharing in front of the class"(Teacher 2, Personal Communication, October 18, 2022) (See

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[1] Brown vs Board of Education Case- on May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that separating children in public schools on the basis of race was unconstitutional. The nine justices overturned the "separate but equal" doctrine.

Appendix 1). My observation is that Teacher 2 is currently using culturally relevant teaching strategies by giving different options of learning and mastery along with communal learning. Teacher 1 shared, "I implement CRT in my classroom by forming relationships with my students, activating my student's prior knowledge, tapping into my student's cultural capital, and making sure that all students are represented/reflected in the classroom environment" (Teacher 1, Personal Communication, November 5, 2022)(See Appendix 1). I was pleased to discover all four teachers using various strategies of cultural responsiveness, explaining the progression in each of their students' learning.

Teacher 2 (Second Grade Male Latino Teacher) provided thorough and insightful answers to my interview questions. Out of the four teachers I interviewed he is Latino and a former ELL. He seemed to know quite a bit about his cultural background, and its effect on his home life and classroom dynamics. When I asked, "Do you embrace your students native languages?" Teacher 2 responded, "Yes, I do embrace my student's native language. I am bilingual, I speak both English and Spanish, and I have a large number of students who are learning conversational and academic English while processing information in their first language. I encourage my ELL's to communicate with me in their native language if they can't find the proper words in English, I also do some translating" (Teacher 2, Personal Communication, October 18, 2022) (See Appendix 1). The connection Teacher 2 has with his students may be due to the fact that he was an ELL student, and comes from a background where communal learning and relationship building are two main characteristics.

3) How does culturally responsive teaching affect elementary Latino students academically, socially, and culturally? The teachers I interviewees always set high academic goals for their students and will provide intervention when needed. For example Teacher #2

said, "I ensure that my students are engaged in a lesson by practicing aggressive monitoring, data tracking, doing regular checks for understanding, and by providing my diverse learners the freedom to show me what they have learned in a variety of ways (e.g. mental math, drawings, manipulatives, etc.)" (Teacher 2, Personal Communication, October 18, 2022) (See Appendix 1). I had the opportunity to visit his classroom and students were either working in pairs of small groups. The students were sharing their thoughts with their peers in their small group and then one per group would offer to share with the whole class. I also noticed Teacher 2 allowed extra time for his ELLs to think and process information as they are learning another language, and often shared their knowledge in stories. He also provided one-one intervention, uses graphic organizers, manipulatives, visuals, positive praise, and celebrates their successes (Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18, 2022) (See Appendix 1).

The ability to implement culturally relevant teaching in a Latino low income elementary school takes intentionality. Teacher1 explained, "Our school is a *Title-1 School,* which means that we cater to the families that are near or around the poverty level in the surrounding communities; minority enrollment is about 89%. Our mission is to provide all students with a high quality education regardless of circumstances, a mission which aligns with my teaching philosophy"(Teacher 1, personal communication, November 5, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Different ways that I observed the second graders' academic needs being met were through evidence-based problem solving, supplemental curriculum, intervention, increased instructional time, computer-based programs and progress monitoring.

Academic teams create a learning experience where students get more one (two)-on-one help. For struggling or shy students, academic teams are less intimidating to ask questions as compared to asking in front of the whole class. Team peers also use language that is easy for

them to understand and enjoy problem solving together. For the high achievers, they are usually

the squad leader and they get to explain content to their peers. Teaching others allows them to

retain the content and be of support to the teacher; better utilizing class time. Teacher 4 shares,

"Sometimes my struggling students can also make great squad leaders, their ability to understand

other students' needs makes them more empathetic. This is important to becoming a leader,

especially if it is content they previously struggled with. On the flip side, not all academically

gifted students are ready to lead squads, sometimes they are too individualistic or focused on just

themselves and still need to learn how to support their fellow students. By giving students

different ways to support each other helps boost confidence. Giving students an active role in

their learning will help struggling students become problem solvers" (Teacher 4, Personal

Communication, October 10, 2022)(See Appendix 1).

As for the social context of the interviewees' classrooms, all four teachers emphasized

that they encourage respectfulness among students.. They do this by teaching the students how to

use respectful words and phrases, by modeling positive behavior, and by speaking to students

about being open to new ideas and ways of thinking. Since working in academic teams or *squads*

allows students to share ownership and collaborate with each other it supports the learning

community. By working communally, students have opportunities to work with students from all

walks of life, all academic levels, and culturally different backgrounds. This is important in

welcoming an all inclusive learning. Teacher 1, shared, "Some values that were important in my

house as I grew up were family and cultural pride, respect, compassion, equity, inclusivity, and

kindness"(Teacher 1, personal communication, November 5, 2022)(See Appendix 1).

The junior high years are important years to nourish communication and to target the

social and emotional needs of the student. Teacher 4 confirmed her desire to meet the social

emotional needs of her students, by stating ,"I have worked hard to create a safe space for us to have difficult conversations about hot topics or current events" (Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Teacher 4 also asserted that, "We have informal community meetings four days a week, and a formal meeting once a week with a scripted social emotional learning lesson. It is during this time that we have difficult conversations about current events. Topics discussed are developmentally appropriate"(Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1).

Culturally, all four teachers mentioned they encourage their students to speak their home languages, celebrate cultural and religious traditions, and bring or eat specially prepared foods, all of which adhere to one's unique cultural norms. During our interview, Teacher 3 emphasized, "I encourage my students to treat each other with respect. I in turn treat all students equitably. We sometimes talk about discrimination and how it effects all of us"(Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022) (See Appendix 1). One of Teacher 3's main approaches to implementing cultural competence within the classroom was by sharing literature that emphasizes different cultural perspectives. Teacher 3 stated, "This year I have a diverse group of students, which reflect the surrounding community" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022). She further stated that, "I have visuals of significant figures from around the world on the walls, a word wall with both English and Spanish words, and a bookshelf that holds artifacts from different cultures from around the world" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Teacher 2 and Teacher 3, both being ELA teachers, have formed their objectives to help students be able to see themselves in literature and discussion, and create more student center learning. Teacher 3 shared confidently, "I aim to help students relate lesson content to their own backgrounds" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October

16, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Teacher 2 excitedly shared a few of his favorite Multicultural

books, " Some of my favorite books are *The Revolt of the Cockroaches* by Oscar Acosta, *In the*

Time of the Butterflies by Julia Alvarez, *The People of Paper* by Salvador Plascencia, and

Caramelo by Sandra Ciscneros to name a few" (Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18,

2022) (See Appendix 1). I was impressed when I visited the two second grade classrooms and I

noticed a *Day of the Dead Table* set up in one classroom and a *Native American Table* in the

other to represent the cultures of the student body. Teacher 1 shared, "This year I have a diverse

group of students,which reflect the surrounding community. I have visuals of significant figures

from around the world on the walls, a word wall with both English and Spanish words, and a

bookshelf that holds artifacts from different cultures from around the world" (Teacher 1, personal

communication, November 5, 2022)(See Appendix 1).

    3) What are indicators of a culturally responsive educator?

       Indicators of a culturally responsive educator are characterized by one who uses the

student's capital (experiences, language, interests) as the basis for instructional connections to

build student learning. Culturally responsive teachers apply interactive collaborative teaching

methods and strategies to engage their students and promote higher order thinking. They reflect

on one's own identity, biases, and lived experiences because they know that those factors will

affect how they perceive their students. Culturally responsive teaching values their students'

identity by supporting their cultural and linguistic resources as assets to build up rather than a

deficit causing a barrier to learning. According to the California Department of Education (2022),

Asset-Based Pedagogies view the diversity that students bring to the classroom, including

culture, language, disability, socio-economic status, immigration status, and sexuality as

characteristics that add value and strength to classrooms and communities. Teacher 4 shared,

"We take the time to build relationships with our students. I enjoy learning about their hobbies, interests and families. I try to take the time to get to know each of my students. I try to implement activities that involve teamwork and collaboration, allowing students to make real-life connections, that provide hands-on opportunities, that promote self-directed learning, and that encourage communication" (Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). I was impressed with the Teacher 2-second grade teacher who made it his goal as well to know all sixty second grade students personally. Teacher 2 shared, "I administer a student survey, which helps me gain insight into my student's interests, talents, as well as their preferred learning style(s). I also look at the student academic cumulative files, and check-in with their previous teachers. I do this by getting to know my student's backgrounds, hobbies, and what makes them unique. Moreover, I like to try to incorporate diversity into the lessons, encourage students to learn about their ethnic and cultural background, and to acknowledge differences and to create a safespace for discussion" (Teacher 2, personal communication, October 18, 2022) (See Appendix 1).

  4) How does the science of learning and development ignite culturally relevant teaching?

  As a democratic society our aim should be educational equity by providing the opportunity for all students to flourish as learners. Curriculum should challenge students to develop higher order thinking skills vs. rote learning (Villegas, 1991).The goal is to help dependent learners become independent learners, Hammond (2015) asserted that, "We want them to have the ability to size up a task, map out a strategy, and then execute a plan" (p.122). Students need to have the freedom to become engineers of their own thinking.

  When I had the opportunity to observe academic teaming I noticed teachers were not just dispensing knowledge, but rather they were acting as catalysts for student-owned and

student-guided learning as the students were collaborating with their peers. *Student Teams* direct

instruction is limited to briefly establishing base knowledge, then students take the lead on

learning within their teams for much of class time (Toth & Sousa, 2019). What I observed about

academic teaming is that it gives all students access to rigorous core instruction along with

effective support.

I asked Teacher 4 to describe how she uses academic teams or "Squads" in her classroom

while teaching sixth grade math. Teacher 4 explained, "Some of the math lessons lend

themselves to such a mode. Students, after reading prompts, work collaboratively to meet the

lesson objectives. Students hold each other accountable, work through misconceptions, check for

understanding, and regulate the group's behaviors. While students are doing the rigorous heavy

lifting, I track data and help support struggling students" (Teacher 4, personal communication,

October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). At this particular K-8 elementary school, all four teachers

emphasized the focus is on squads, or groups of students, rather than individualism. I have

concluded, team based and learning centers increase engagement by providing experiences that

include student perspective and values.

As a future educator, I find it important to assist my students in becoming independent

learners and team players. A class of thirty or more students can become overwhelming for an

educator; therefore promoting independent thinkers and knowledge constructors will allow for

efficient use of time and staff. Teacher 3, shared with me how *squads* are used in her sixth grade

ELA classroom. Teacher 3 shared, "Academic teams are referred to as *squads*. Academic teams

(*squads*) are groups of 3 students who have specific roles and responsibilities while they are

working on the lessons. There is a squad leader (facilitator) who leads discussion, assists students

in squad, a quality manager (in charge of timer and checks the students work), and presenter

(displays the lesson on the TV)" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022) (See Appendix 1).

While observing the implementation of *squads,* I noticed students have opportunities to both teach and be taught through peer led discussions. They usually have to work together to complete lessons and assignments. This method allows students to be partners in their education. Students are participating directly and actively engaging material-active learning. On the contrary, traditional classroom set up is a teacher based model-students are passive learners receiving one or two strategies. It follows the model of "I do", "We do", and "You do". Skills are repeated throughout the lesson. There is little interaction between students, rather the feedback is often from the teacher.

Unlike the traditional classroom setup, in the team-based learning model the desks were set up in groups of three defining their squad. The math lessons in the sixth grade lend themselves very nicely to such a mode of instruction. Students, after reading prompts, work collaboratively to meet the lesson objectives. Students hold each other accountable, work through misconceptions, check for understanding, and regulate the group's behaviors. While students are doing the rigorous heavy thinking, the teacher tracks data and helps support struggling students.

Squad leaders are trained to include everyone. Students' grades also reflect their level of participation and citizenship. In addition, I noticed the teacher calls on students regardless of having the right answer or not. The school has a *culture of error,* meaning errors are a part of learning and errors are encouraged! I liked this philosophy because when I grew up, errors were discouraged, but this group of learners look at errors as *misconceptions*. Academic teams create a learning experience where students get more one (two)-on-one help. For the lower achieving

students, it's less intimidating to ask questions in the small group as compared to the whole group. For the high achievers, they are usually the squad leader and they get to explain content to their peers. Teacher 3 says, ."*Squads* are the norm in our classrooms. Students receive training in the beginning of the year, and throughout the year, to help them be successful in their roles. It does take time for students to embrace academic teams" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16, 2022) (See Appendix 1). It is evident that all four teachers find it necessary that Latino elementary students have input in their education, are active partners, and invested in the outcome.

5) What resources are available for future teachers?

I learned from my interview, observations, and surveys that there are effective teaching strategies available for future teachers. For example, low performing students at this particular K-8 school receive help in a variety of ways. The teachers collect data on each student and use that data to identify where a student is struggling. This will direct the teacher to focus on pulling those students daily for a quick intervention or spiral in a small group to be sure to target the gaps. "Sometimes I need to meet with my team leaders to have them work with individual squads to help squad leaders be more effective in reaching their squadmates," describes Teacher 4 (Teacher 4, personal communication, October 10, 2022) (See Appendix 1). Teacher 3 explains, 'In Middle School, outside the classroom, there is a 20-30 minute time allotment built into the schedule four times a week for intervention" (Teacher 3, personal communication, October 16 2022) (See Appendix 1).

A few other resources my participants recommended for future teacher use are two computer-based programs (IXL*)* which gives at bats problems, and *Aleks* which is an adaptive math program. An after school homework club is also offered if students want to join and get

additional academic support.. The book, *The Power of Student Teams*, by Michael Toth & Sousa (2019) is an excellent resource recommended to me by my four interviewees. Founder and CEO of Learning Sciences International supports the theory, "The brain that does the work is the brain that learns) (Sousa, 2017)." Also, another resource is the book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain,* by Zaretta Hammond (2015), in which she graphically lays out the framework and indicators of culturally responsive teaching and how it works.

After surveying sixty sixth grade students at this particular low-income Latino elementary school, I was able to collect enough data from their responses to support my research project. I was curious to how many students in sixth grade enjoyed working in groups rather than individually, and surprisingly out of the sixty students surveyed, 83% said they prefer working in academic teams, and 17% said "no," they would rather work alone (See Appendix 2, Question 1). Next, I inquired of the students if working in academic teams encourages participation from their peers, and 18 % said no and 82% said yes (See Appendix 2, Question 5). To support my data collection, I asked the students if they felt comfortable asking a team member for help when needed, and 96% responded yes, and 4% said no (See Appendix 2, Question 8). Overall, after examining the answers to the survey on (Appendix 2), I have concluded that working in academic teams is benefiting this group of diverse learners, by encouraging active and collaborative learning and high-order thinking skills. As I reviewed the results from my anonymous student survey, the students were asked to share a time in which they got to be a leader at school, the majority responded while working in their *squads* and helping their teammates (See Appendix 3, Question 5). I thought this was a perfect example of how teachers can foster leadership in the classroom. Asked if the students viewed speaking a second language at school or home as an asset, the response was 95% an asset (Appendix 3, Question 21). The

overwhelming majority responding yes to language being an asset provided me insight on how teachers are supporting students' cultural identities.

Problems and Limitations

Many teachers today feel that they do not have adequate training to teach in a culturally responsive manner. Teachers hear the words "culturally responsive," but in reality they wonder what it encompasses. I think teachers need to be provided personal development days with training specifically in the area of culturally responsive teaching, along with coaching throughout the year with feedback provided as well.

I realized toward the end of my project that it would have helped my research results to have included a larger sample size of school sites. One more charter school in a surrounding city and a nearby public school could have helped me compare and contrast different variables. Another aspect to my research I would change next time would be to interview the eighth grade students. They would have been able to provide more explicit feedback to my interview and survey questions due to length of time under *squad* strategies. One factor which I think would have expanded my research would have been an interview with the principal. For one, the principal could have provided history on their current teaching strategy and specifics about staff training.

Gloria Ladson-Billings' (2005) theory of Culturally Responsive Teaching has been widely criticized in the Republican conservative community. Republicans in office are concerned that teachers would be required to teach liberal political views. Republican conservative representatives fear that culturally responsive standards of teaching would inject partisan, progressive politics into the classroom, expressing this is not education but rather indoctrination. There are those opposed to the inclusiveness of cultural responsiveness and argue that teachers

need to stick to reading, writing, and arithmetic. Those opposing the idea of being culturally responsive think this is just *one more thing* to micromanage teachers.

What the opposition needs to understand is that culturally relevant teachers may not set out to be revolutionaries, but if that is where their students lead them, they are prepared for the journey. Even though culturally responsive teaching strategies can seem intrusive to some sectors of our society, they must realize it is the responsibility of the teachers to connect with their learners to establish a safe space for learning.

As I conducted research on culturally responsive teaching there proved to be sufficient information in this particular field of study. I did not encounter any major limitations within my research project, except for the fact that I should have surveyed the current eighth graders at my research site. This group of learners could have provided me with a more experienced survey, which would have allowed me to collect more data in regards to working in "academic squad teams."

Currently, the educational movement toward culturally responsive teaching seems to be on an upward trend due to the influx of diversity in our public school system, and its effectiveness. As teachers of diverse learners, Hammond (2015) states, "We have a particular duty to help dependent learners build their intellectual capacity so that they are able to do more independent learning and higher order thinking" (p.89). Educators are eager to find a way to close the achievement gap due to the implemented solutions not being very effective. If this is so, I would highly recommend teaching culturally responsive to your unique group of students.

Recommendation

As the Latino population of students increases in our nation so does the need to respond to Latino learners effectively. Failure to be more responsive can be detrimental to our nation, not

only by a loss of human potential, but also to our nation's social, political and economic stability. It is therefore critical to how the public- school system prepares Latino students for success in education by examining what is taught, and how it is being taught. There is a need to transform the curriculum provided by state boards of education and frameworks for learning in order to eliminate biases.

I would recommend that educators take the time to research culturally responsive teaching strategies so that they can incorporate this empowering methodology into their classroom curriculum. Not only does it benefit a student's learning, but it also provides the teacher with a powerful response to the cultural assets deposited within their students. Teachers need to focus on creating a sense of connectedness, especially with children who come from a relationship-oriented culture (Hammond, 2015).

A powerful tool would be if teachers challenge and invite other educators to join them on this journey of discovering the freedom to teach in a culturally responsive way. A challenge to educators is to think about how you would tailor strategies and use tools to fit your grade level, school context, and your own personality. From what I have observed, it is easiest if teachers begin with one or two strategies for building relationships and one or two for knowledge constructing. You do not want to get overwhelmed by thinking you have to change everything in your teaching style. Observe your student learning behavior, and then put small actions into practice, collect data, and do not forget to create space and time to analyze and interpret data, finally reflect and adjust one's practices.

I would recommend teachers discuss controversial topics more often with their group of learners to increase the comfort level, rather than avoiding the topic. I would also recommend creating more opportunities for families to become active participants in their child's education

by creating the space and time for them to do so. Being that culturally responsive teaching is meeting the needs of a primarily Latino population, why not try collaborating with other schools serving a high percentage of disadvantaged and underperforming students.

Throughout history our nation's schools have been and still remain to be racially segregated, leading to a wider achievement gap in education. As the achievement gap grows wider due to economic and racial factors, the group that is affected the most is our largest growing population of students-socioeconomically disadvantaged students of color-Black and Latino. It is time our administrators, principals, and teachers advocate on the part of their students by supporting teaching in a culturally responsive way so the needs of the diverse learners in the local community will be met.

Conclusion

Culturally Responsive teaching equips teachers to provide students with the type of education they not only deserve, but are entitled to. An education that recognizes and celebrates their academic potential, identities, lived experiences, and culture. I have learned that teachers can implement culturally responsive teaching strategies into their classrooms by establishing a social-emotional partnership with their students, holding students to high academic standards and high order thinking skills, implementing cultural models of learning to activate brain's information processing, building a community where a safe space to socially take risks in learning, and encouraging critical thinking that allows students to see themselves as agents of change

Culturally responsive teaching is a two-way investment. Not only are the teachers invested in their students' learning, but so is the student as they construct knowledge together. Teachers who commit to the vision of academic improvement, cultural awareness, and

community building will make a significant difference in the life of a child (Ladson-Billings, 2005). As Latino students are better prepared for higher academic rigor, they will have the tools necessary to succeed in higher education and to pursue their career goals. As we invest in the fastest growing population in our country, its returns will be for the pursuit of equality as well as economic stability.

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Appendix 1

Teacher Interview Questions

How well do you know your students (likes, dislikes, learning styles, families, etc.?)

Alot_____, Somewhat_____, Not very well_____.

What are you doing to learn more about your student's culture?

How are you building and sustaining student relationships?

How do the instructional materials you use affirm your students' identities?

How are you engaging your students in a critical examination of power structures?

Are your students co-designer's of the curriculum?

How are you adapting your instructional strategies to the diverse learning styles of your students?

Are you incorporating resources that are written and developed by racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives?

Do you have opportunities to invite or involve families into your classroom?

How do you help your students develop a positive racial and cultural identity?

Do you create space for sometimes difficult conversations about current events?

How are you encouraging student-led civic engagement in your classroom?

Do you embrace students native language?

What are academic teams?

Do academic teams reflect the students' culture in any way?

Communal or Individualistic?

How do you integrate academic teams into your classroom?

How would you say academic teams benefit your diverse group of learners?

Do you know if there are any other schools in San Benito County that use "Squads teaching strategy" in their middle school classrooms?''

Why do you think 'Squads teaching strategy" was chosen over a traditional classroom set up?

How does "Squads teaching strategy" contribute to teaching and learning in your middle school classroom?

How do you think implementing "Squads teaching strategy" into your classroom benefited the middle school learner socially and emotionally?

Do you read Multicultural literature?

What does culturally responsive teaching look like to you?

How do you implement culturally responsive teaching into your classroom?

How do you ensure all students are engaged in a lesson?

How will you make sure all students have a voice in a lesson?

How do you encourage respectfulness among students and their perspectives?

How will you provide all students with a representation of themselves in the lesson?

What is your cultural background and home language?

What do I know about my own culture:family values, heritage, traditions, religion, and language?

What values were important in my home?

How were those values communicated?

How important was college education to your family?

What percentage of your students are of Latino descent?

Appendix 2

Anonymous Student Survey

1. Do you think working in "Squads" has helped you retain the material that you're learning?

Yes   No

2. Do you think working in "Squads" has helped build your confidence in solving Math

problems?

Yes   No

3. Do you think working in "Squads" has improved your ELA skills?

Yes   No

4. Do you think "Squads" has helped improve your problem solving skills in Science?

Yes   No

5. Does working in "Squads" help improve participation from all squad members?

Yes   No

6. Are all "Squad" members in your group actively participating?

Yes   No

7. Do you offer feedback or opinions to other members in your "Squad?"

 Yes   No

8. Do you feel comfortable asking a "Squad" member for help when needed?

 Yes   No

9. Do you think you are getting to know your classmates better by working together in

"Squads?"

Yes   No

10. Do you think working in "Squads" has helped build your classroom community?

Yes   No

11. Do you think each "Squad" member contributes their fair share to daily work or projects?

Yes   No

Appendix 3

Anonymous Student Questionnaire

1. What helps you feel welcomed in your classroom or school?

_____

2. What strengths do you bring to your "squad?"

_____

3. What do you like most about school so far?

_____

4. What would you like to see changed about your school?

_____

5. When do you get a chance to be a leader at school?

_____

6. When do you feel you are being listened to at school?

_____

7. Who believes you can succeed?

_____

8. When do you feel frustrated at school?

_____

9. As a learner, do you view your mistakes as a "lack of ability" or "information" to improve the

outcome the next time around?

_____

10. When do you feel challenged and supported?

_____

11. What inspires you in school?

_____

12. What is culture to you?

_____

13. What do you like about your culture?

_____

14. What is one important thing my culture has contributed to the world?

_____

15. How do you see your culture reflected in your learning experiences at school?

_____

16. What is one *value* important in my classroom?

_____

17. What is one *behavior* important in my classroom?

_____

18. What have I learned about another culture this school year?

_____

19. Do I read books about other cultures other than my own?

_____

20. Do you speak another language other than English?

_____

21. Do you view speaking a second language either at school or at home as an asset(positive) or deficit (negative)?

_____

20. Do you prefer working alone or in groups for class projects?

_____

21. Do you feel comfortable asking questions in the classroom?

_____

22. What is one strength you bring to your learning community (classroom)?_____